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SPECIAL SCREENINGS

French Revolution Series at UCLA's Melnitz Theater

By KEVIN THOMAS,
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The UCLA Film Archives' "The French Revolution and the Cinema" continues Thursday with "Danton" (1921) and "Les Chouans" (1946), which screen at 5:30 and 7:30 p.m., respectively, in Melnitz Theater.

Adapted by Russian émigré director Dimitri Buchowetzki from Georg Büchner's 1835 fragment "Danton's Death," the handsome German silent "Danton" stars Emil Jannings as the boisterous, sybaritic Danton and Werner Krauss as the ruthless, rigidly puritanical Robespierre. This "Danton" seems simplistic, despite the presence of two legendary actors, in comparison to Andrzej Wajda's recent "Danton" with Gerard Depardieu in the title role, but gains power in its climactic sequences, in which Danton bravely faces the Tribunal.

"Les Chouans," which Henri Calef directed from Charles Spaak's loose adaptation of the Balzac novel, reflects the weary mood of post-World War II France. Jean Marais plays a handsome Royalist, dispatched from England, to lead an uprising in Brittany, and Madeleine Lefeau is the beautiful leading lady, a Republican spy. What's made to seem more important than either of their causes is their love for each other, as doomed as that of Romeo and Juliet. "Les Chouans," which is what the royalist sympathizers were called, is an example of the well-crafted, big, romantic, '40s picture. Its antipolitical tone was much criticized upon its release, but it has worn well.

"Les Chouans" will be followed by the lavish "Marie Antoinette" (1938), in which Norma Shearer in the title role and Robert Morley as Louis XVI are surprisingly touching, and Jacques Tourneur's 10-minute "A King Without a Crown" (1937), which speculates on the fate of Louis XVII.

Information: (213) 206-FILM, 206-8013.

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On Friday and Saturday, the Nuart will present a 96-minute program of videos (transferred to film) focusing on the work of San Francisco's Survival Research Laboratory. Hiding behind that formidable title is a group of multitalented iconoclasts, launched a decade ago by artist Mark Pauline.

In essence, what SRL does is to create immense, Rube Goldberg/Krector Set-like mechanical dinosaurs, some of which really do breathe fire, and set them to battling each other as a commentary on contemporary technological society's infinite capacity for self-destruction.

The group's latest effort is the 40-minute "The Will to Provoke: An Account of Fantastic Schemes for Initiating Social Improvement," which, despite that subtitle, is primarily a record of its performances last year in Amsterdam and Copenhagen, where SRL received a riotous welcome. Frankly, it's a case of one having had to have been there, for the documentary meanders, growing monotonous.

Its director, Jonathan Reiss, is far more successful in conveying the monsters' disturbing impact in the fictional, up-close context of his 13-minute "A Bitter Message of Hopeless Grief," in which the creatures go at it in what seems like one of the darker rings of Dante's Inferno.

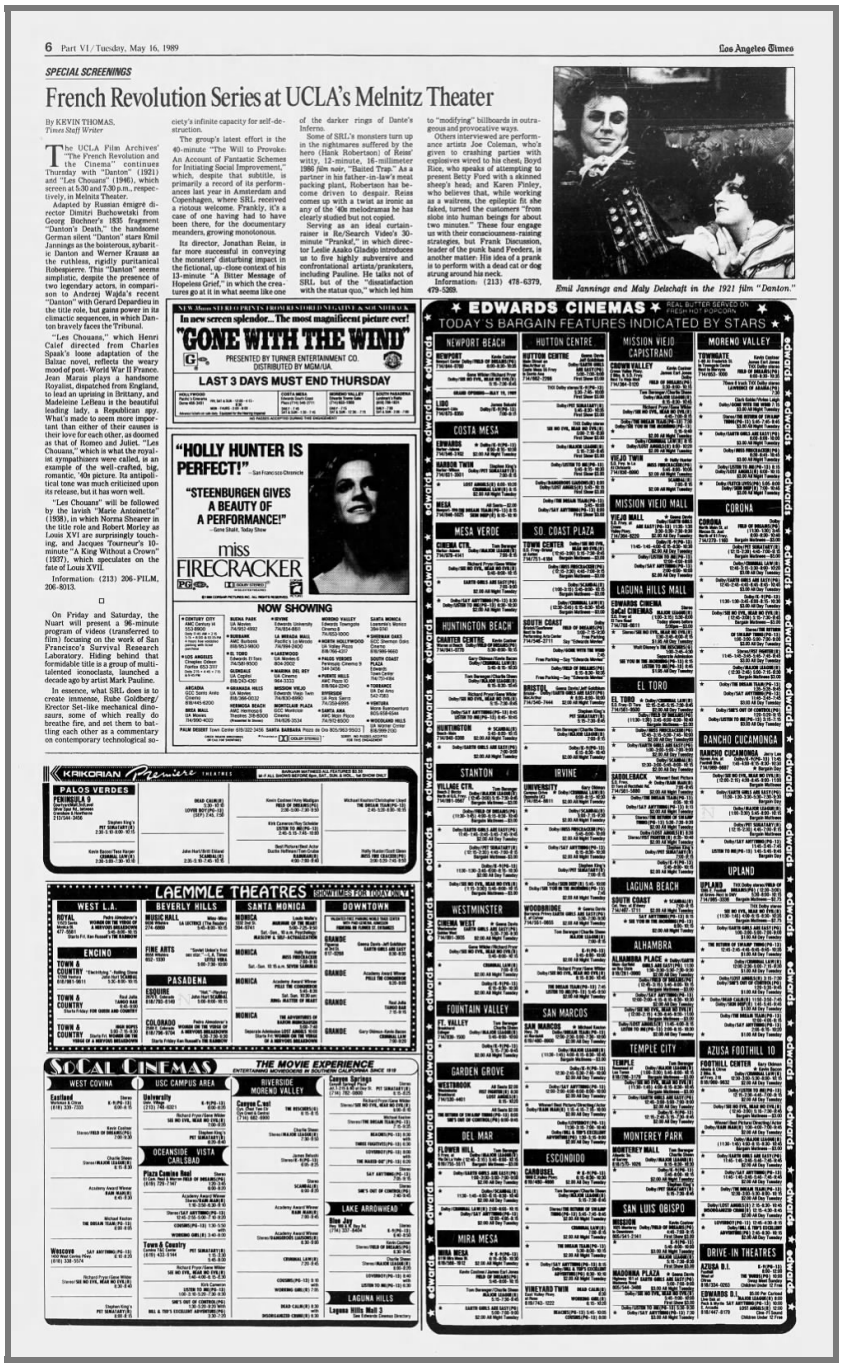
Some of SRL's monsters turn up in the nightmares suffered by the hero (Hank Robertson) of Reiss' witty, 12-minute, 16-millimeter 1986 film noir, "Baited Trap." As a partner in his father-in-law's meat packing plant, Robertson has become driven to despair. Reiss comes up with a twist as ironic as any of the '40s melodramas he has clearly studied but not copied.

Serving as an ideal curtain-raiser is Re/Search Video's 30-minute "Prankd," in which director Leslie Asako Gladjo introduces us to five highly subversive and confrontational artists/pranksters, including Pauline. He talks not of SRL but of the "dissatisfaction with the status quo," which led him to "modifying" billboards in outrageous and provocative ways.

Others interviewed are performance artists Joe Coleman, who's given to crashing parties with explosives wired to his chest, Boyd Rice, who speaks of attempting to present Betty Ford with a skinned sheep's head, and Karen Finley, who believes that, while working as a waitress, the epileptic fit she faked, turned the customers "from globs into human beings for about two minutes." These four engage us with their consciousness-raising strategies, but Frank Discussion, leader of the punk band Feeders, is another matter. His idea of a prank is to perform with a dead cat or dog strung around his neck.

Information: (213) 478-6379, 479-5269.

Emil Jannings and Maly Delschaft in the 1921 film "Danton."



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